UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN ARCHAEOLOGY IN BRITAIN: AN OVERVIEW

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SUMMARY

In Britain Archaeology is recognised as an independent academic subject, with a higher level of funding than Arts subjects. There are three levels of degree, the Bachelor, traditionally the entry point into the profession, the Taught Masters (increasingly the entry level), and the PhD. Degrees are considered only part of the training needed by archaeologists, a practical experience working in the profession is equally important. Degrees are increasingly seen as only the start of a process of 'life long learning', and there is a great need to integrate this learning into defined career structures. Given the great variation in expertise needed by different types of archaeologists, a modular approach to the acquisition of skills is being explored by the Institute of Field Archaeologists, which will encompass the courses offered by universities.

RESUMEN

En el Reino Unido la arqueología está reconocida como una materia académica independiente, con un nivel de subvención mayor que las materias artísticas. Existen tres tipos de titulación, el Bachelor, que ha constituido tradicionalmente la vía de acceso a la profesión, los Taught Masters (que se está convirtiendo de forma creciente en la titulación de acceso profesional), y el Doctorado. Las titulaciones se consideran tan sólo una parte de la formación que necesitan los arqueólogos, ya que una formación práctica es de igual importancia. Las titulaciones tienden a considerarse cada vez más como el inicio de un proceso de formación continua y existe la necesidad de integrar esta formación en carreras estructuradas y definidas. Dada la gran variedad de especializaciones que necesitan los diferentes tipos de arqueólogos, se está ensayando una aproximación modular a la adquisición de habilidades por parte del Intitute of Field Archaeologists, que complementará los cursos ofrecidos por las universidades.

RESUM

Al Regne Unit l'arqueologia està reconeguda com una matèria acadèmica independent amb un grau de subvenció més gran que les matèries artístiques. Existeixen tres tipus de titulació, el Bachelor, que ha constituit tradicionalment la via d'accés a la professió, els Taught Masters (que s'estan convertint de forma creixent en la titulació d'accés professional) i el Doctorat. Les titulacions es consideren tan sols una part de la formació que necessiten els arqueòlegs, ja que una formació pràctica és d'igual importància. Les titulacions tendeixen a considerar-se cada vegada més com l'inici d'un procés de formació continuada i existeix la necessitat d'integrar aquesta formació en carreres estructurades i definides. Donada la gran varietat d'especialitzacions que necessiten els diferents tipus d'arqueòlegs, s'està assajant una aproximació modular a l'adquisició d'habilitats per part de l'Intitute of Field Archaeologists, que complementarà els cursos oferts per les universitats.

Introduction

The development of university training in archaeology in Britain has been very different from that in most European countries, on the whole to its advantage, though the situation is continuously changing, and in common with the other university subjects we have suffered a major drop in funding in the last decade. Actual overall funding for universities has in fact increased, but this has been accompanied by a huge increase in the numbers of students, with the result that student funding *per capita* from government sources has dropped by 40% in the last decade, while pay for academic staff in universities, compared with similar professions, has fallen by 30% in the last 20 years. In addition grants for students attending university have been abolished, and replaced by loans, and richer students must now pay a contribution towards their fees – it was free until a decade ago. This has serious implications for a profession such as archaeology which is relatively poorly paid. Though there are signs that the Labour government has recognised the problem of university funding, it has not yet resolved how to deal with it.

The major advantage that British archaeology has had over most continental countries is that it has been recognised as a subject in its own right, and not as an adjunct or subsidiary of History, Art History, Geology, etc. In addition, it is recognised as a 'part science' subject, like Geography, and so obtains a higher level of Government funding than pure Arts subjects such as History; this is to cover items such as field and laboratory training. Students in many universities thus have a choice of doing an Arts or Science degree, and many departments are within both Science and Arts faculties (Henson 1999). Archaeology has also been recognised as a subject which provides a wide range of skills which can be used in a variety of careers, ('transferable skills' such as team work, statistics, field and laboratory training, writing essays, etc.), and it has been popular both with students and education authorities as a good general subject for students who are not looking for vocational or professional, training. Archaeology has also been expansive, invading the subject areas of adjacent disciplines; so, in contrast to Germany where disciplines are tightly defined, in Britain archaeologists have themselves taken over scientific areas such as pollen, soil, bone and seed identification, and developed their own techniques and theories more relevant to the questions asked by archaeologists rather than those asked by scientists traditionally trained in the Natural or Biological Sciences (Collis 1995, forthcoming 1). This has led to the emergence of large and heterogeneous departments, with teaching staff with a wide range of skills and academic background.

Each university is independent (e.g. staff are university, not state, employees), and the development of each subject, and the appointment of staff, is a matter for each university, taking into account market forces, especially student demand; the more

students, the more money, so the more staff and facilities. The British university system is also competitive, so not only do we compete with one another for research funds, but also our level of funding is directly related to our research rating through the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). This is decided every four or five years by a committee of archaeologists appointed to classify each department (all university subjects are similarly treated), and the Government has recently established an organisation to oversee this, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). At present three departments have the top 5* rating: Cambridge, Oxford, and Sheffield. Teaching will also be classified in 2001, in the Teaching Quality Assessment (TQA), likewise under the aegis of the QAA, but at present this has no financial implications, though it is likely to when it becomes fully established. This competitive situation makes it imperative that universities appoint the best possible staff, and also that staff maintain a high quality once they are appointed (through staff reviews, personal development plans, staff appraisal, etc.). Thus, unlike the Spanish system where there is a tendency for departments to appoint their own students to posts, in Britain the appointment is much more competitive, and preference is given to a someone from another department to give a wider range of experience and background to the department's teaching and research.

Teaching in British universities occurs at three levels (Bachelor, Masters, and Doctoral) with a fourth area of diplomas and short courses at various levels, and I will deal with each of these separately.

Undergraduate Degrees

At most British universities the lower degree, the Bachelor (BA, BSc) in archaeology is a 3-year course. Because we cannot assume that students will have studied archaeology in school (for the majority it is not possible) we accept students with a wide range of backgrounds, with specialisms in the Arts, Social Sciences or Pure Sciences, and so we have to assume that the first year of any course will be concerned with giving a basic background to archaeology. Students can take archaeology by itself (Single Honours), or jointly with another subject such as History, Ancient History or Geography (Joint or Dual Degrees), or under modular systems, they may take one or two courses a year from other subject areas; most common, however, is for students to concentrate on archaeology from the first year. In the early 1990s there was a massive increase in the numbers of students taking archaeology degrees, though applications have been declining slightly over the last 3-4 years.

Each year we have about 1200 students graduating with some sort of degree in archaeology in Britain, but with a profession which, in Britain, consists of only some 4500 full-time professionals, we have to assume that the majority of students will not become archaeologists. The training is often

oriented towards the needs of this majority rather than those who intend to make archaeology their profession. Recently the Govemment had demanded that all subjects should define the range of topics they would expect a typical graduate in the subject to have covered, and the level of knowledge which might be achieved ('benchmarking'), and this has been organised through the QAA. That for Archaeology was published earlier this year (QAA 2000). Most courses in Britain concentrate on the wider aspects of archaeology, such as Theory, Methodology, and the Social and Political aspects of archaeology, rather than more specific aspects such as artefact identification. There is also a strong emphasis on basic practical skills, such as fieldwork, drawing, computer skills, statistics, or laboratory techniques (bone identification, etc.). However students need to see how these work in practice, so there are general courses ranging from World Archaeology, to the detailed study of a specific time period in a defined area (e.g. Iron Age Britain), and all students are expected to have done two or three courses dealing with specific time periods. The reasons for this emphasis are two-fold: firstly it is accepted that most of our students want general skills rather than those specific to professional archaeologists; secondly it is recognised that the jobs professional archaeologists do are very varied, and it is impossible to cover all of this in an undergraduate degree. Though not everyone agrees with the approach, it is the one encouraged by our professional institute, the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA).

Taught Masters Degrees

The most massive increase in students taking archaeological degrees in the last 10 years has been in the area of Taught Masters Degrees, which include general courses on the techniques of archaeology, but mainly specialised courses, especially scientific approaches, but also areas like computing, landscape archaeology, standing buildings, museum studies, etc. Though cynics may, with some justification, argue that departments put these courses on to increase their Research Rating (the numbers of postgraduates being one of the criteria used in classification), there has been a steady market of students taking courses, many paying for themselves. There are four main groups of students who take such courses:

1) Those intending to take a higher research degree. Increasingly the funding bodies are insisting on a Masters degree as a prerequisite to undertaking research at the doctoral level. Scientific courses are especially popular.

2) People who have already started their career, and return to obtain more specialist training in their area of interest (e.g. standing buildings, computing, etc.).

3) Students who did a degree in another subject, and wish to change to archaeology.

4) With so many students possessing a Bachelor degree, and such great

competition to get a post in archaeology, many students consider that a higher degree will give them an advantage in job hunting. Though in the profession most practitioners still consider the Bachelor to be the entry point, this perception is changing rapidly in the universities and in the professional institute.

In addition, it is possible to take a Masters degree which is based purely on research. This is becoming increasingly rare.

Doctoral Research

For those wishing to follow an academic career, the doctorate (PhD, D.Litt) is a necessity, and also for many pursuing a scientific approach to archaeology. Many also see it, perhaps wrongly, as giving them a better opportunity of finding a post in archaeology. This is the highest degree available in Britain, and traditionally took several years, often continuing after the student had found employment. Many students can obtain grants from Government bodies for three years of research, but increasingly such bodies are insisting on 'value for money', that is that all students should complete their research within 3, or at most, 4 years, though it is the departments, not the students, who are penalised if completion rates are not satisfactory. The research is seen more as 'training for research' than research in its own right, leading to claims of 'dumbing down' of the quality of the PhD. Those looking for an academic career now commonly have to wait a number of years after completion before they can find a post, and the gap is filled increasingly by 'postdoctoral' research grants.

Diplomas and short courses

These are most commonly given by Departments of Continuing Education (where archaeologists are often employed), rather than by archaeology departments. The level varies considerably. There are courses which are designed to give qualifications to mature students without the necessary school qualifications, so that they can enter university. Some universities also provide part-time degrees, or diplomas, often aimed at the amateur market, often with distance learning. The other area is in short courses, which may only be for a few days, often inviting experts in the field to provide the teaching. This is an expanding area, as, encouraged by Government demands for 'life-long learning', professional institutes and employers are demanding that professionals and staff should undertake agreed programmes of training each year (Continuing Professional Training – CPD). Archaeology is no exception, and this will soon become compulsory for all members of the IFA (Bishop *et al*. 1998). Though not all such training will take place in universities, they will certainly be a major provider.

Problems

Though the archaeological training provided by British universities has reasonable claims to be among the best in the world, nonetheless, there are a number of problems which are subject to on-going discussion. The first is the argument about whether the undergraduate courses should be providing training which is adequate for those wishing to enter the profession Ever since I was a student people in the profession have argued that the training given to students is inadequate, indeed there has been traditionally a rift between 'academics' and 'practitioners' who may have very different ideas of what archaeology is all about, and so what training is needed. As I have argued above, I believe that professional training is neither possible nor desirable, a view which is also taken, surprisingly, by the IFA representing the profession. However, we all recognise there is a major gap between what undergraduates are taught, and what they need to practice as archaeologists. Students are at present left to fill this gap themselves, and there is little advice about what training is really needed, and how to get it, if it even exists. There is no advice on career structures, and often students are ill-advised to take further training courses until they have a wider grounding in the profession, a clearer idea about what they want to do, and whether jobs are available in the sector that interests them (Taught Masters in human bones are extremely popular, but it is a very competitive area where considerable expertise is required, and jobs are few). But to what extent is training through the PhD of relevance to those seeking an archaeological career? I personally believe the government restrictions are bad for the profession, and I am campaigning to get them changed (Collis forthcoming 2).

The profession is highly fragmented, and so what is relevant in one area may not be relevant in another. Many archaeologists do not end up digging or doing other sorts of fieldwork (survey, aerial photography). Many become administrators in local or national government, dealing with the recording and preservation of the historical heritage, or they work in museums, or in tourism, or teaching in schools and universities, or providing scientific reports on finds. Some way needs to be found for all of these people to receive the necessary, often highly specialised, training. In addition, provision is needed for more specialist training, in the form of CPD. There is also a European dimension, as to what constitutes an archaeologist, and, under agreements about to be implemented, professionals will have the right to practice in any country in Europe. How do we define an archaeologist? One of our leading experts on excavation, the author of books on the subject, and professor in one of our universities, would not be allowed to dig in Germany under German definitions of an archaeologist! So, what role does university education play in the training and definition of an archaeologist? I shock many of my continental colleagues by saying that an

archaeological degree does not make one into an archaeologist!

Solutions

The usual British solution to problems is to set up a committee, or, preferably, several! University teaching of archaeology is no exception! Firstly we have SCUPHA (the Standing Committee of University Professors and Heads of Archaeology). It represents the interests of archaeology departments, especially if there are, for instance, threats to funding, and it can deal officially with government bodies. However, it is largely reactive, with no policies of its own, and it is not representative of university lecturers as a whole (only professors).

Potentially the most important body is the professional institute, the Institute of Field Archaeologists (IFA). However, it largely represents the 'professionals', with only a small percentage of academics being members. It not only represents the profession in its dealing with government and other professions, but it also tries to further the interests of its members (e.g. pay and conditions), and especially in the imposition of professional standards. One of its key committees is the Professional Training Committee (of which I am Chairman) which deals with all aspects of training and education of archaeologists. In recognition of the key role that universities play in training, a sub-committee has been set up to advice the IFA, the Higher Education Committee, which will take a much more pro-active role, for instance in the recognition and accreditation of university courses, advice on careers, content of courses, etc.

The third major committee, also newly established, is the Archaeological Training Forum, set up by English Heritage, to bring together representatives of all the interested bodies: employers, museums, commercial units, government training organisations, universities, etc. It has access to funds not available to other bodies, and has already commissioned a number of studies of the present state of archaeology in Britain, including training requirements (Aitchison 1999, forthcoming; Chitty 1999, forthcoming). The general aims and policy of this committee are still developing, but an initial overview has been recently published to encourage wider discussion (Collis 2000). Finally, at the European level, we are trying to co-operate with European colleagues through the Association of European Archaeologists (EAA), with the IFA as one of the lead organisations, but also with round tables on training, usually organised by myself. The 2001 meeting will specifically be looking at the content of university courses, and their role in definition of the subject and its practitioners.

In brief, through these various organisations we hope to be able to develop a clear career structure for archaeologists, both in Britain and Europe, and also define what the levels of training should be, and indeed what an archaeologist is. We need to be

exploring ways in which the universities can play a more relevant role in the training of archaeologists, especially after students have graduated, but also we have to look for other ways of providing training and funding it. As I have already said, the needs of different groups is very varied, as indeed is the training that various universities provide, not only within Britain, but across Europe, and we need a flexible system which recognises this, without providing a strait-jacket into which all courses are expected to fit (in British universities we have rejected the idea of some sort of national curriculum for archaeology).

The present suggestion is that we should list all expertises that archaeologists may need, from very practical matters such as how to use a level or a specific computer program such as AutoCAD, to more general matters like archaeological theory, and also non-archaeological training such as First Aid, Health and Safety, personnel management, etc. The different levels of skill can be measured on a scale of 1 to 5, from a basic awareness to international expertise. This modular approach to training has a number of advantages. Jobs can be defined in terms of the skills needed, and the level of expertise required; universities and other training providers can state what skills their courses will provide, and to what level. Individuals can log these skills as they acquire them, entered in their professional logbooks, and signed by someone qualified to say they have that expertise (i.e. someone of level 4 or 5 on the competency scale), and these can be supplied to future employers when applying for a new post. Individuals and employers will be able to define what further training an individual needs. Though it sounds very bureaucratic, we hope that its working will in fact be quite easy, especially as the IFA is likely to require all its members to maintain logbooks to show that they are keeping up to date in their areas of expertise. It can also be used to define the various grades within the professional institute itself

In summary, major developments are afoot in British archaeology, of which the universities, whether they wish it or not, will be key players. These are developments which could have major implications for our colleagues in Europe, and we earnestly hope that we can all co-operate and share ideas through the EAA.

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